

For Sapphire Needle: An Essay on Suffering in Rhythm

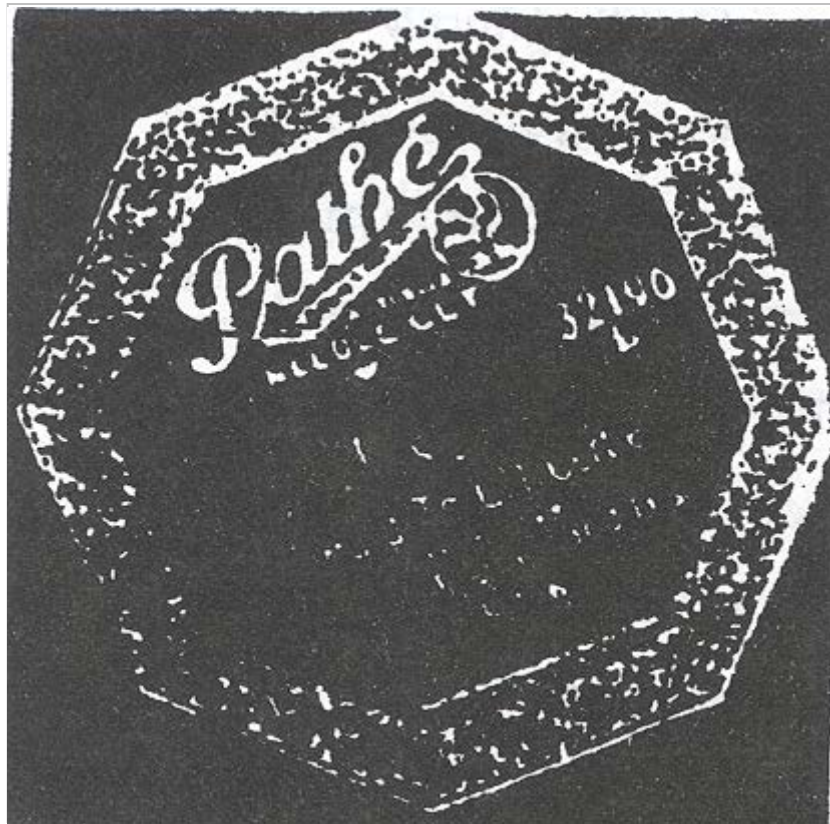
Paul Vincent Spade

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For David Baker

Note: Before Industrial diamonds became the standard, the highest quality phonograph needles were made with a sapphire tip. Cheaper ones were plain steel, and some early needles were made of wood or even thorn. Sometimes old records say on the label "For Sapphire Needle."

I



What is the importance of the old Pathé blues record, for sapphire needle, that keeps making its appearance in Sartre's *Nausea*? The record with the black woman singing, "Some of these days/You'll miss me, honey"? He says the most extravagant things about that record. Toward the end of the novel, he states it outright: the woman is saved by being caught down there in those grooves. Not just saved like a museum piece, but actually *redeemed*. She is "washed of the sin of existing," he declares.

Isn't that an awful lot to expect? It's only a record, after all. It even has a scratch in it.

There's more. Through that record, Sartre goes on, we glimpse a little melody in another world begin to sing and dance: "You must be like me; you must suffer in rhythm."

Really, now. How could there be anything about that frozen voice, that I am supposed to *imitate* it? And how could I be like a *melody* even if I tried? But he says it again. This time it's four notes on a saxophone, before the singer starts. They tell me, "You must be like us, suffer in rhythm." He even calls it a "glorious little suffering," an "exemplary" one.

What does all this mean?

II

"A woman is a sometime thing," Gershwin wrote. So is music. It's gone as soon as it is played. Especially music as spontaneous as jazz or blues. You only get one chance; if it isn't right the first time, you've lost it forever. You can perform the same thing again, in a way, but really it will turn out to be something entirely different; you might as well call it a different piece.

People are like that too. There's only one chance to get things right. You make yourself up as you go along, you choose this or that course in life, you improvise. And then you're gone.

Whatever else it is, a recording is a way of preserving a fleeting performance, of guarding against its loss. It makes something by nature transitory into something permanent. Recording is music's way to immortality.

Is that all there is to it then? Sartre's blues record is a little token of human immortality, but nothing more? It's a nice symbol, perhaps, very arty. But does it really deserve the extreme claims he makes for it? *Washed of the sin of existing? Suffer in rhythm?*

III

Let's try again.

There are other ways to guard against music's loss. The most obvious is just to write it down. A score is perhaps another of music's ways to immortality. Even a jazz improvisation can be transcribed and preserved for posterity, to be studied and reiterated by others.

But on second thought, that's a completely different thing. To being with, musical notation is a net with far too wide a mesh; all the nuances slip through. There's no good way to write down that little bent note, that squawk, that hoarseness. And even if there were, it would still be different.

You see, notation doesn't really guard against music's loss, no matter what I said just now. A transcription doesn't really make a performance immortal. The performance is dead, all right. All the transcription preserves is a formula for making something else *just like it*, even if only in my imagination. A finer-grained scheme of notation, a more complete transcription, would only give more detailed instructions for making something *else even more like it*. But it's still *something else* we're talking about, not the original performance. The original is gone.

That's not guarding against loss; it's insuring for the replacement value. It's not immortality; it's cloning.

A transcription is a recipe for a future performance, perhaps, but mainly it's a chronicle of a past one. It converts the merely temporary into something unalterable and permanent. It tames the wild *event*, turning it into a domesticated *thing*. So in a way, it is like that old Pathé blues record. In both, the transcription and the record, a process has been congealed into a thing. The music is now completely predictable. There is no risk in it any more; it is safe and secure. You know in advance how it is going to turn out, for better or for worse.

IV

Still, there is a big difference between a transcription and a recording. A transcription doesn't just capture and preserve a performance. It sucks the life out of it and turns it into a mere report, a history. The security and permanence of a transcribed performance are bought at a high price: death. A transcription kills what it claims to immortalize.

It's the same with human beings. One way of achieving a kind of immortality, I suppose, is to be made the subject of a eulogy or an obituary, even a biography. In *Nausea*, Sartre at first presents his character Roquentin as engaged in writing the biography of someone named Rollebon. (It doesn't matter who he was. Does anyone care? By the middle of the book, Roquentin has abandoned the project entirely.)

A biography, then, is like a musical transcription; it is a rendering of a life. There you are, once and for all, your existence is committed to paper. There's no doubt any more about who you are, it says so right here. You don't have to decide things for yourself now, it's all fixed. What a comfort to be relieved of the burden of improvising life, to be washed of the sin of existing in such an unsettled, untidy state.

But that's not immortality, or if it is it's only a posthumous one. The "sin of existing" can't be absolved in this way unless you are dead, so that you "go and sin no more." What a perverse kind of immortality that requires you first to get out of the way to make room for it, that presupposes its very opposite, that's only good when you're not there to enjoy it. A biography, like a musical transcription, doesn't *really* immortalize any more than a mummy does.

V

But a recording is different. It doesn't "immortalize" by killing. It captures a little bit of reality and keeps it in a bottle. When the black woman sings "Some of the days/You'll miss me, honey," we're not hearing only a description of her singing, a report from the past. We're hearing the real thing.

It's not like reading a story, where we *imagine* the events narrated. No matter how vivid my imagination, still *I'm* the one imagining those events, in accordance with the narrator's directions. All the effort is coming from me.

But I'm not *imagining* the woman's singing; I really hear it. There she is, in person, caught forever on record. I'm making no special effort here, just listening. She's the one doing all the work.

It's not like looking at a painting either. A painting is a *product* of the artist's skill and labor. When I look at a painting I don't see the process that yielded it; I see the results of that process. If I knew about such things, I could perhaps infer what the process was, how the painter achieved that particular effect with a special stroke of the brush. But I don't actually see it happening, and wouldn't see it even if I did know how he worked.

Yet when I listen to that record of the blues singer, I not only hear the result of her labors. I hear the labors themselves. The overall mournful effect of her song — I don't have to *speculate* how she achieved that. I *witness* her achieving it right in my presence, building it up note by note.

Recording turns a process into a product, yes. The event becomes fixed, repeatable, secure. But it's not killed. It remains just as alive as ever, only caught up like Sisyphus in a kind of eternal return. The saxophonist's improvised response between the singer's lines, that little growling inflection she spontaneously adds at the end of the word "honey" the first time through — they're still genuinely improvised, still spontaneous. For all their recorded predictability, they're still fresh every time. The life is there intact, only it's a life that's now secure and defined. It's a life with nothing to worry about any more. No wonder Sartre describes her as *saved*.

A transcription immortalizes a performance the way a monument immortalizes a life, by a kind of *fake* immortality, an imitation of the real thing. But a recording immortalizes a performance, together with the life and breath that went into it, by a *real* immortality.

Isn't that finally why every garage band in the world wants to make a "demo" tape right away? It's not just the hope of a glamorous career; perhaps they're more realistic than that. No, there's something else. There's something about the recording itself that makes the whole process legitimate, that *redeems* the players.

(Home movies work the same way, if you think about it.)

VI

In his technical writings, Sartre describes the traditional Western notion of God as the notion of something both eternal and changeless ("God don't never change," says the old Gospel song), perhaps outside time entirely, and yet also completely *alive*, spontaneously choosing to create, loving his creatures, freely entering into contracts and covenants with them, inextricably involved with time and history. God is a freedom without risk, an improvisation that's already settled, a life the same forever — just like that old blues record for sapphire needle.

That's what it is about Sartre's record. No wonder it has such a magical, almost mystical appeal. There's something *divine* about it. That little singing and dancing melody tells me to *be like* it. It's only telling me what I already know: I too want to be immortal like that. Those four saxophone notes command me to imitate them. They're just urging me to be holy and godlike. The singer's wail really does express an "exemplary" suffering. It is the suffering of redemption. She is singing that we must take up our cross and follow her, that we too must suffer in rhythm.

A Note to the Reader

Sartre talks about the blues record in two main passages of *Nausea* (and others in passing): pp. 21–22 and pp. 173–78 of the Lloyd Alexander translation, published in paperback by New Directions. The volume is inexpensive and readily available.

Sartre's description of the blues record is a mixture of fact and literary license. The song "Some of These Days," with words as he describes, was the theme song of famous vaudeville singer Sophie Tucker (1884–1966), "The Last of the Read Hot Mamas." She was Jewish, not black, although early in her career she often sang in blackface and was billed as (excuse me) a "World Renowned Coon Shouter." (This wasn't her idea.) The song itself was written and published in 1910 by Shelton Brooks, a black songwriter (although Sartre describes the composer as Jewish), and was based on the earlier "Some o' Dese Days" by Frank Williams (1905).

Tucker's autobiography, *Some of These Days*, was published in 1945. In 1963, she was the subject of a Broadway musical, "Sophie."

Paul Vincent Spade lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where he cultivates his Hoosier roots and teaches philosophy at Indiana University. Rumor has it that he sometimes plays the piano in what he calls the "stomping and thumping" style, but this cannot be independently verified.